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Book Reviews

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Review of *Archaeologies of Touch: Interfacing with Haptics from Electricity to Computing* by David Parisi (University of Minnesota)

Ricky Crano

ABSTRACT *Archaeologies of Touch* announces itself as an opening salvo for a new media studies subfield capable of addressing this ongoing haptic reconstruction of our media environment. Parisi charts a genealogy of haptic interfacing that begins with seventeenth-century experiments using electrostatic generators and culminates in the latest projections for virtual reality. Over several centuries, we have become rendered "haptic subjects" through an "ongoing cultural training" (43) though "tactile media"—a "shifting assemblage composed of technical elements, embodied sensations, and cultural practices" (97). No longer aiming to stimulate the full surface of the flesh, what now counts as touch-based media assures but one or a few points of contact between the tip of the finger and the screen. Far from fulfilling the fate of electronics by rebalancing the human sensorium, haptic feedback as we know it today seems a step in the opposite direction. Parisi closes his book with a spirited call to action insisting on the need for an interdisciplinary subfield of haptic media studies, on par with visual cultural studies and sound studies.

Archaeologies of Touch: Interfacing with Haptics from Electricity to Computing.

By David Parisi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018, 452 pp.

(paperback) ISBN 978-1-5179-0059-5. US List: \$28.00.

In the space of just over a decade, touchscreen displays have bounded from novelty to ubiquity, now present in airports and grocery checkouts, in libraries and public parks, built into our vehicles and our appliances, snapped onto our wrists, and snuggled into our pockets. In this timespan, the technology itself has developed at a fantastical pace. Since the 2004 release of Nintendo DS, the first successful mass-market touchscreen device, the US Patent and Trademark Office has reviewed some two million applications and granted nearly 800,000 patents related to touchscreen development and design. The commercial enthusiasm for the future of technologized touch could hardly be more pronounced. Fading fast is the age of the unapproachable image, the unidirectional interface, the ever looming, ever alien spectacle. Tech developers and marketers hail ours as a new era in sensorial rebalancing, with products like multi-touch displays and force feedback controllers heralding the collapse of the strong visual bias of late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century computing and, more broadly, the twilight of ocularcentric modernity.

David Parisi's momentous new book *Archaeologies of Touch* announces itself as an opening salvo for a new media studies subfield capable of addressing this ongoing haptic reconstruction of our media environment. Parisi charts a genealogy of haptic interfacing that begins with seventeenth-century experiments using electrostatic generators and culminates in the latest projections for virtual reality (and something Parisi dubs "the teledildonic imaginary" (303)). Parisi's book is in close rapport with Lisa Gitelman's

inquiries into the normalization and routinization of earlier modes of media interfacing¹, as well as with Jonathan Crary's landmark work on nineteenth-century visual culture.² It also supplies a powerful rejoinder to the influence the latter's work has had, as *Archaeologies of Touch* explores how, over several centuries, we have become rendered "haptic subjects" through an "ongoing cultural training" (43) in "tactile media"—a "shifting assemblage composed of technical elements, embodied sensations, and cultural practices" (97). While Parisi calls for others to develop counter-narratives, his is the story of a "progressive mediatization of touch" (150). By the time we get to the touchscreen and the smartphone, we find "the whole of the tactile system [reduced] to the single point of contact between finger and screen" (275). Parisi's approach is scholarly and sober, yet it is hard not to view this as a still-unfolding tragedy. With the flattening of touch, its multifaceted sensitivities and capacities are pruned down and primed to engage a stultifying interface that struggles to simulate such outmoded contrivances as sliders, buttons, and knobs.

The first chapter—Parisi appropriately calls them "interfaces"—depicts two centuries of attempts to manipulate touch sensitivities through the use of electrical currents. Beyond the electrostatic generator (of 1663), we find the Leyden jar (1745) and Alessandro Volta's first batteries (1800). By the end of the eighteenth century, "electricity [had become] an object of scientific curiosity, a commodity for spectacular consumption, and a medical technology" (45). Alongside these developments, especially in the run-up to "the golden age of electrotherapy" (1880–1920), bloomed an enduring commercial interest in tactile media. A genealogy in the Foucauldian mold, Parisi's work implicitly invites us to contemplate how at each turn things might have evolved otherwise. But the express focus is to supply a culturally and historically informed critique of the present, specifically a critique of how new media apparatuses channel and distribute power today. Along the way, Parisi seeks to perform a double rescue of touch: first, from its diminution by emergent habits or practices of the touchscreen trend; second, from the margins of media studies as it has been conceived of and institutionalized to date. It is touch, Parisi argues, that supplied the "original mode of communicating with electrical machines" (95), and so it is touch that today we are most in need of recovering.

Interface 2 examines the increasing refinement of haptic research towards the turn of the twentieth century: the consolidation of power in the space of the lab, and the standardization of experimental protocols and measurement techniques. Touch, as "an object of rational experimentation" (107), gradually was "enclose[d] within a new epistemological framework" (105) that we continue to operate within. Parisi depicts this process of normalization and management as one in which the flesh was "rendered as data" (125). This rendering, in turn, would open the door for "the *idea* that touch could have its own particular, formalized, machine-generated language" (160). Interface 3 looks at a series of episodes in the broad movement to integrate touch into the "communicative economy" that now plays such a decisive role in the maintenance and reproduction of contemporary capitalist societies. The extraordinary efforts Parisi culls from the archives (think Teletactor, Tongue of the Skin, Tactile TV) would, alas, all fail, or at least fail to travel beyond the space of the lab. But even in failure, early- to mid-twentieth century touch research laid important groundwork for the distinctly capitalistic (and often militarized) cultivation of the twenty-first century haptic subject. As psychophysicologists, linguists, electrical engineers, and eventually computer scientists came to imagine touch as a refined communications system, "the skin's vast expanse became an untapped and underexploited resource...that could be capitalized on through the design and iterative refinement of signaling systems and languages" (194).

As snarled in commercial influences as haptics research has become, the discourse and ideologies that Parisi examines nonetheless evidence a formidable humanistic counterpull. Interface 4 covers the period from the late 1960s through “the cybercultural moment” of the mid-1990s. Parisi dubs this “the experimental era of touch feedback computer interfaces” (215), marking not just the next stage in the progressive “instrumentalization, rationalization, and disciplining of touch” (217) but “a wholesale... rearticulation of touch’s social, psychological, and economic utility” (219). This era of haptic research and product development (like General Electric’s exoskeletal apparatuses that incorporate force feedback to allow the operator not just to manipulate objects remotely but, crucially, “to feel at a distance” (222)) could be characterized as rather utopian. The technological advancement and the ideological fervor seemed to be keeping stride. And this where the commercial investments really begin flooding in.

Interface 5 takes up the “material dedifferentiation of interfaces accomplished by the touchscreen’s flat glass” (264), a product made possible only through “a normative process of selecting which objects, forces, and contacts could and should be rendered as sensations” (261). By the early 2000s, it would fall to the marketers and advertisers to shape our ideas of and expectations for what remains of technologized touch. In this scenario, consumers—increasingly hailed as “haptic subjects”—are prompted to see themselves as missing something vital in their everyday interfacing with the digital world, something only corporations like Immersion or Oculus or Google can offer. Parisi offers a close reading of a suite of print advertisements and sloganeering to reveal “the process by which the new mode of interfacing became naturalized and seemingly instinctual.” (273) No longer aiming to stimulate the full surface of the flesh, what now counts as touch-based media assures but one or a few points of contact between the tip of the finger and the screen. Far from fulfilling the fate of electronics by rebalancing the human sensorium, haptic feedback as we know it today seems a step in the opposite direction. “What the newly empowered, anesthetized finger could touch, it could not feel.” (279)

So concludes the evolution of tactile media to date, but for Parisi, something of touch persistently escapes the rubric of haptics. “The *inability* to faithfully and convincingly simulate touch has allowed the real to maintain its value even in a hypermediated and simulated culture” (327). On the flipside, the three centuries of interfacing Parisi accounts for make it plain that “touch can no longer be considered a sense that has been neglected...by mediation systems.” (330) Parisi closes his book with a spirited call to action insisting on the need for an interdisciplinary subfield of haptic media studies, on par with visual cultural studies and sound studies. Parisi’s call seems somewhat paradoxical, however, for what his meticulous genealogy demonstrates above all else is the fact that the sweeping potential long-heralded by haptics propaganda is but a myth, a technoscience fantasy and a grandiose advertising pitch. The plot to mediatize touch has not and likely cannot succeed, Parisi seems to suggest, as he dissects past and present dreams of building virtual reality’s “killer app.” The tactile remains all too real. Next to his own formidable demythologization, Parisi’s insistence that media studies treat touch as equivalent to vision and sound seems somewhat overinflated. What would be the point of haptic media studies if the influence and cultural adoption of haptic media stops short at vibrating theater seats, Nintendo Rumble Paks, buzzing alerts from our smart watches and phones, and whatever reductive, unconvincing simulations VR systems might manage to conjure in the coming years?

Archaeologies of Touch is lucid, scrupulous, rigorously grounded, and exceedingly informed without ever getting mired in high theory or inconsequential historical asides. If there is a flaw in the project, it is that the “haptic subject” that Parisi ultimately reveals remains so scattered and incomplete and largely underwhelming in its cultural

effect. *Archaeologies of Touch* is a significant achievement in media research, yet Parisi envisions it as but the tip of the iceberg for an emerging subdiscipline. His genealogy, capped by an incisive condemnation of the current reductivism of touchscreen technoculture, would seem to cut short the task going forward for such a subfield. This should be seen as more a commendation than a criticism of Parisi's powerful work.

Notes

1. Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006. [↗](#)
2. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999. [↗](#)

[Bio](#)



Ricky Crano

Ricky D. Crano teaches critical media studies and writing at Tufts University and is completing a book about neoliberalism and digital culture called *Swipe Right: Posthuman Capital and the Social Media Subject*. He lives in Somerville, Massachusetts.



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